'Singing Up' the Silences: Australian nature writing as Disruption and Invocation

NOELENE J. KELLY
Victoria University

The genre of nature writing is commonly understood to be largely absent in this country. In its *belle lettristic*, or "high art" form particularly, it is reckoned to be virtually non-existent (Zeller 1998). While it is not my purpose here to advance a strong line of argument in this regard, it is worth noting that CA. Cranston in her essay 'Tasmanian Nature Writing and Ecocriticism' (2001) refutes this claim and makes a convincing case for a continuous and sophisticated tradition of nature writing in the Tasmanian, if not the broader Australian, literary context (59). So nature writing, in the matter of its very existence in Australia, conjures a note of disjunction, a chord of instability – a type of disruption if you like. It is not, as I say, my aim to establish nature writing's historical underpinnings or literary pedigree. Rather, my purpose is to consider the distinctive characteristics and potentials that adhere to the genre as it is unfolding here, and as it is currently practiced. By way of approach, I will examine two aspects of Australian nature writing, which in my view are either in evidence within current practice or are required of the genre as it interacts with the inner life of this land, and with its particular historical and cultural dimensions. This essay then, will consider Australian nature writing as disruption and as invocation. It will draw on a range of place-based texts, particularly works by contemporary Australian writers Nicolas Rothwell and Mark Tredinnick, to explore these themes.

Disruption

A Silent, Empty Land

One of the legacies, both literary and cultural, which Australian nature writing might usefully disrupt, is the pronounced pejorative note that is frequently attributed to early settler apprehensions of this continent. Admittedly, a great deal of early literature can be read as negative, casting the land as 'empty', particularly of Indigenous presence, but also of sound, of speech, of agency. Tropes of age, of barrenness and foreboding, of timelessness and aridity are common, and carry through to contemporary cultural representations. We are used to terms such as 'dead', 'empty', 'silent', to describe the land here, and familiar with the notion that there is something fundamentally amiss in the very nature of the place. Marcus Clarke's well-known *Preface* to the collected verse of Adam Lindsay Gordon is often quoted in this regard: 'In Australia alone', he writes, 'is to be found the Grotesque, the Weird, the strange scribblings of nature learning how to write' (1909 iii). As writer and academic Peter Conrad has noted, so strange and unfamiliar did the continent appear to both early settlers and their compatriots in Britain that it was openly wondered whether 'Australia could be the handiwork of God's

enemy, the mad demiurge described by Gnosticism,' or perhaps 'God's fumbling rehearsal', the 'botched job' that was a precursor to the creation of a perfected northern hemisphere (Conrad 2−3).

While it is true that this particular apprehension of the continent has played forcefully in the cultural imaginary and has had vast and detrimental consequences for Australian ecologies and peoples, it is equally important to note that there have been other voices (Seddon 2006). In Van Diemen's Land for example, settlers experienced 'an abundance of fresh water, a temperate climate, reliable rainfall, density of game ...' (Boyce 4). Even on the mainland responses to the continent were more diverse than scholars such as Conrad might suggest. Consider for example this reflection from Victoria's first State Botanist, Ferdinand von Mueller:

> I regard the forests as a gift, intrusted to any of us only for transient care during a short space of time, to be surrendered to posterity again as an unimpaired property, with increased riches and augmented blessings, to pass as a sacred patrimony from generation to generation (Mueller 27).

In his book *Colonial Earth* (2000) Tim Bonyhady historicises the negative apprehension of the land and the environmental havoc colonial invaders are understood to have wreaked on Australia's fragile ecosystems. Advancing an important corrective to this view, Bonyhady comments that 'While many colonists were alienated by their new environment, others delighted in it' (2000 3). The painter John Glover for example, reckoned the eucalypt a 'painter's delight'. The towering mountain ash forests of Victoria were lauded as a 'wonder of the world', while the Tasmanian blue gum was acclaimed internationally as a 'tree of the future'. By the 1880s Port Jackson was commonly referred to as 'Our Beautiful Harbour', while early settler correspondence referred to the 'astonishing variety' of bird life, with its 'uncommonly beautiful' plumage and 'melodious' song (Bonyhady 4, 15). In 1788, Elizabeth Macarthur famously declared 'the greater part of the country is like an English Park'—in clear ignorance of the land management practices of Aboriginal peoples that had made it so—but marvelling nonetheless at the health and obvious integrity of the land she was observing (cited in Bonyhady 77).

Early nature writers were a significant part of the advancement of this more positive view. As Tom Griffiths has noted, early nature essayists such as Donald Macdonald and Charles Barrett played a crucial role in 'finding, or creating, local symbols of sentiment' whereby immigrants could begin to forge a degree of identification and intimacy with their local places (Griffiths 122). Some of them, such as Macdonald and later, Mary Gilmore and Marjorie Barnard among others, brought to public consciousness not only the 'delights of indigenous nature' by valorising indigenous plants, animals and land forms, but also some of the darker and more difficult aspects of settlement – aspects that many local communities were working hard to obscure and to silence (Griffiths 124). Macdonald observed, for example, that '[t]he reason we know so little about these aborigines is that instead of studying we shot them' (1905 15). While it is true that for many early nature writers such concerns interacted with, and to a certain extent

contradicted, 'concepts of race and empire' that also underpinned their writing, they nonetheless advanced an agenda of 'direct, watchful, sensuous engagement with nature' and inspired in their readers a sense of wonder and purposefulness in coming to know their local ecologies (Griffiths 124, 127). Furthermore, at a time when the principles of evolutionary biology were beginning to destabilise previous notions of the scientist as 'collector', it was the nature writers who advanced a new way of being in relationship to the world – one where observation rather than collection was primary, and where 'a human vision of the land' was promoted against the 'detached professionalism of the new scientist' (Griffiths 134).

As I mentioned above, this is not to suggest that the continent was not experienced as difficult and strangely unfamiliar by many or even most of the settlers who came here. But the importance of Bonyhady's thesis lies in its evidence for and affirmation of the existence of a *range* of narratives dealing with early apprehensions of this land. It is these alternative narratives that provide the ground from which nature writing and other forms of environmental writing might launch into the imaginative cultural space, disruptions of more instrumentalising approaches to land. It is also these alternative narratives that might entice contemporary nature writers and ecocritics to reconsider the possibilities residing within this literary inheritance.

Terra Nullius 1

A deeper apprehension of the Australian landscape is fundamentally linked, of course, to recognition of the complexity and longevity of Indigenous history and place-making. One of the critical tasks of nature writing then is the disruption of the lingering assumptions, contradictions and injustices that stem from the concept of *terra nullius* – the legal term which at settlement denoted the continent of Australia as 'common land', available for 'shared use' (Boyce 7), but which was later interpreted as 'land belonging to no-one' (Reynolds 12). For settler Australians, representing the land from a position of knowledge and intimacy in the way that nature writing requires, is clearly problematised when that same land is the site of Indigenous dispossession and ongoing regimes of violence, social marginalisation and economic disadvantage.

As Peter Read asks in the opening line of his book *Belonging* (2000), 'How can we non-Indigenous Australians justify our continuous presence and our love for this country while the Indigenous people remain dispossessed and their history unacknowledged?' (Read 1). A corollary question from the perspective of nature writing is, how can settler Australians write about lands and places they love, knowing that those lands and places were previously lost to others? At least part of the answer lies firstly in textual acknowledgement of prior Aboriginal occupation and of the mutual and symbiotic relationship that existed, or presently exists, between Indigenous communities and their country. An example of such acknowledgement being accomplished quite deftly and within the natural flow of a place-based work is found in the opening section of Mark Tredinnick's landscape memoir, *The Blue Plateau* (2009):

> The people who were too smart to winter here named the place how it sounded.

> Katoomba is what they called it, and that is how they carried the place on their tongues for so many thousands of years we may as well call it forever (Tredinnick 13).

So acknowledging that this continent is known and named, is the 'country' of, Aboriginal peoples, is one of the first tasks of nature writing. Acknowledgement though, is but one element within a much broader set of issues that nature writing must negotiate. As Judith Wright observed many years ago, settler presence on this continent will remain ethically ambiguous until some form of legal negotiation—in the form of a treaty for example—is entered into with the Indigenous peoples (Wright 284-306). While the High Court's Mabo (1992) and Wik (1997) decisions significantly advanced the possibility of resolution within this complex arena, rights to land in the case of Indigenous peoples, and legitimacy of place attachment in the case of settlers, remain highly contested and deeply painful issues in this country. While works in the nature writing genre cannot and need not address such complex issues directly or in every circumstance, some stance towards settler relationship to land and to its Aboriginal custodians needs to be taken, at least implicitly, within the text.

Terra Nullius 2

Nature writing in the Australian context must also deal with, and in certain ways disrupt, complex discourses around the issue of wilderness preservation. As Marcia Langton has observed, the concept of wilderness that equates "natural" with the absence of human trace or culture is a highly westernised and relatively recent construct. Furthermore, reserving areas of the national estate as people-free zones perpetuates, she argues, another insidious form of *terra nullius* (Langton 16). There is a tension here though, for while settler Australian writers of place are exposed to an Aboriginal cosmology where land is experienced as 'sacred geography' (Rose *Reports* 34), as 'nourishing terrain' (Rose *Terrains* 72), they are also in receipt of a nature writing tradition, and indeed an environmental movement, that is not only heavily influenced by British Romanticism, but also by North American notions of the sublime (Hay 273; Cranston & Zeller 10). As Leo Marx (228) and William Cronon (85) have observed, the wilderness trope has played strongly in American literature where it is fused with the idea of American exceptionalism and social and religious regeneration.

Against this background, writing the human into the landscape is both subversive of accepted notions of wilderness and expressive of the actual earth-human relationship that has existed on this continent for millennia. In fact, it could be argued that the very essence of nature writing praxis, the heart of its curriculum, is much closer to the Indigenous notion of 'country' than it is to constructions of nature as 'transcendental wilderness' or the idyllic Arcadia that underwrites the 'pastoral romantic' (Robin 5). For, as Mark Tredinnick makes clear, nature writing 'serves the land' by folding human concerns, human relationships, human presence, back into the broader matrix of the earth (*Place on Earth* 37). Caution needs to be exercised in this regard, however. For those who would universalise the Indigenous model of human integration in the landscape, claiming that it is only by eliminating our desire to set land aside as

"wilderness" that we can begin to regard all landscapes with respect and dignity, I would say this. There may come a time when settler Australians will have such compassion for life in all its forms that the preservation or protection of specific lands will not be necessary. To be sure, nature writers are themselves working towards this ideal. But that time has not yet arrived. In the meantime it may be wise to err on the side of caution. In the meantime whatever can be protected of Australia's unique lands and waters should be protected. In the meantime nature writing can function as one tool by which we imagine a more seamless connection between our human lives and the domestic and wild places in which those lives unfold.

Terra Nullius 3

Within the Australian context then, the disruption of various forms of *terra nullius* is an essential element in the nature writing project. Acknowledgement of Aboriginal history, place-making and current justice claims, along with a certain honesty and transparency regarding the historical realities of settler dealings with Aboriginal peoples and with the land, are part of the ground from which nature writing on this continent emerges. There are, however, other forms of *terra nullius* that are equally pervasive and which nature writing should also seek to destabilise. The 'prior vacancy' which instrumental culture makes of the objects of its attention is one such form (Plumwood *Shadow Places* 139). As Plumwood has argued, this reductionist view of matter as 'dead' and 'silent', as devoid of speech and agency, is a foundational pillar of the scientific/rationalist framework and is highly resistant to alternative, more wholistic ontologies. The ecological result of this conflation of the material world with the 'empire of mere things' is obvious and compelling. The project therefore, of challenging spirit/matter dualism – of 're-inspiriting matter' while simultaneously 're-materialising spirit' is, as Plumwood suggests, an urgent one (*Shadow Places* 141). It is also, above all a task for writing.

Consider for example, the following passage from journalist and author Nicolas Rothwell:

> It was close, by then, to sunset. Smoke plumes hung low in the sky. The sun's beams picked out the marks on the rock. They shimmered and abruptly there was movement everywhere. Fear held me, fear so deep I feel it still if I bring those moments back in thought to life. I retreated. Time passed, and gradually once that journey into these events formed themselves into a shape inside my head, I came to realise what that fear was. Not just fear of the unknown, the strange, the sacred, no. It was an awareness of the landscape's depth and the presences that rest within it. And as I look back it seems clear to me that whenever I came close to such places in the inland, I could feel those presences nearby (Rothwell *Land, Culture*).

Here, even the rocks themselves are shimmering and alive with psychic indwelling. Nature writing in this instance serves the broader project of subverting oppositional binaries, of bridging the matter/spirit divide. More broadly, in listening to the land, in writing place from multiple perspectives and across multiple time-frames, nature

writing holds the larger story of the land in view. It reconfigures as animate and intentionalising those aspects of world that have long been objectified and silenced within the constructs of reductive materialism. In the process, and this is a point well made by Plumwood, nature writing points to the possibility that in reconsidering a lively and agential world, humans themselves are re-made, become 'multiply enriched' and necessarily 'constrained members of an ecological community' (*Nature* 119). This more expansive notion of world as both powerful and creative, and this re-positioning of the human within a network of interdependent and dialogic relationships, is critical to whatever efforts we might make to address the ecological crisis that is everywhere upon us.

Invocation

Singing the land

So, Australian nature writing functions as a form of disruption within a number of discourses. What then can be said of nature writing's capacity to invoke, to 'sing up' the world in various ways and contexts, and particularly within familiar places – those local modalities we all inhabit? Philosopher Freya Mathews uses the term *ontopoetics* to describe the communicative engagement between people and place. *Ontopoetics* rests on the premise that an inner, psycho-active aspect of reality not only exists but can be accessed and engaged with. Furthermore, Mathews argues that this inner dimension of world, this 'poetic order', can be 'invoked' (*Poetic Structure* 11), can be called forth on an expressive plane that is meaningful and not merely causal (*Ontopoetics* 2). One of the ways in which this communicative engagement may be accessed or at least brought to consciousness is, I would argue, through nature writing, and particularly through two of its major dimensions – narrative, and what Kate Rigby calls its 'ecological aesthetics' (*Myth, Memory* 175).

Narrative

Nature writing understands landscapes as storied realities, composed of geomorphic strands – of grand tectonic narratives as well as the slow tales of wind and water. There are other aspects too; elevation and temperature, the play of light, force of wind, texture of air, and the distinctive way these elements pattern themselves within a place. And, as Barry Lopez notes, there are also human stories; Indigenous histories firstly, that are both personal and tribal, that confer a 'temporal' and 'moral dimension' to an otherwise spatial landscape (22). This is particularly so in Australia. But nature writing also works to enfold second wave peoples into the narrative of the land, into its meaning and its ends.

By noticing, by responding to the way all these elements are arranged within a place—the distinctive compositions of mood and sound and song that cohere there—nature writing affirms not only the 'inner aspect of reality', but also the tendency of world to 'seek to story itself' (Mathews *Poetic Structure* 11). As Mathews explains it, story is an intrinsic structure of 'self', and self is understood here not only as the human self, but 'any *self-realizing system* – any system that maintains itself in existence by its own

intentional efforts' (*Poetic Structure* 10). If "*world"* is also "self" in the sense that Mathews posits here, then it follows that its 'inner structure' will respond to and resonate with the structure of story (*Poetic Structure* 11). For this reason, narrative address not only elicits a response from world, but also is 'efficacious in activating the poetic order' (*Poetic Structure* 11).

Story then is one means by which the world may be called forth, engaged with, encountered. It is a form of invocation that 'sings up' the psycho-active dimension of reality and enables communicative engagement between self and world. As Rothwell comments in his preface to *Wings of a Kite-Hawk* (2003):

> There are patterns and connections in our lives that elude us: resonances, fields of force, which go unknown until we tune our minds to the world beyond ourselves. Often it seems to me that life's surface and the links of cause and effect we imagine ruling us are deceptive, and that deeper systems and symmetries lurk just out of sight: patterns that yearn for us to find them, and align ourselves with them. I believe it is the task of the writer not only to trace the hidden links between places, and between people, but to live in such a way that those links become clearer, and the hidden geometries around us confess themselves (Rothwell xxi).

In this estimation nature writing not only acknowledges the *ontopoetic* aspect of reality but affirms the task of the writer in making 'the hidden links' between people and the inner life of a place clearer, in calling those 'deeper systems and symmetries' forward so that in being storied they become a means by which the human may once again 'slip beneath the skin of the world' (Mathews *Ontopoetics* 8). In its narrative aspect then, in its capacity to story the land, to comprehend and find lyrical expression for a landscape's inner coherence and patterning, nature writing reminds us, calls to consciousness, the possibility that the world—that 'larger scheme of things'—is predisposed to communicative exchange and will respond to our invocations, will 'manifest its self-meaning to us', in the context of poetic address (Mathews *Desiring* 14). But nature writing, while affirming and invoking this inner dimension of world, also functions phenomenologically; that is to say, it holds that reality is also apprehended sensuously, through the visceral, embodied encounter between self and world.

Ecological Aesthetics

Along with poetic or narrative address, nature writing invokes the world through its mobilisation of the human senses. In what ecocritic Kate Rigby calls 'ecological aesthetics'—a term she borrows from Gernot Böhme—the visual apprehension of landscape is superseded by an attunement to place that is multisensory, multidimensional, and responsive (Rigby *Tuning in* 113). In the following passage this deeply sensorial aspect of nature writing is an essential ingredient in the text's effectiveness. Here, I recount a scene from a live presentation by writer and philosopher David Abram in which he reflects on the association between language, breath and *ruach* – the Judaic sacred or holy wind.

> It is remarkable, he says, that the most holy of God's names, the four letter Tetragrammaton, "Y-H-W-H", is composed of the most breath-like consonants in ancient Hebrew. The most sacred of God's names is an utterance spoken, in a sense, by the wind. He places his open palm on his chest now and begins a slow, dull, beat. The forgotten pronunciation, he says, may be shaped by forming the first syllable, "Y-H," on the whispered in breath, and the second syllable, "W-H," on the whispered out breath. His palm is beating on his heart and his lips are forming the syllables and the air is making low sounds in his throat as he pulls it in and releases it rhythmically, and something is rising on this single cycle of breath, some other presence is moving here, some voice is pressing up through the alchemy of air and lungs, pressing through the breath and the sounds and the sounding of the divine name and reaching back, pressing into our bestial memory, carrying all of us, for a moment, deep into the flesh we share with all the world, and we fill our lungs with it and it seems as if we share a single breath and the air that enters us tastes of soil and of seaweed, and it rolls on our animal tongues like the rich and budded breath of the earth itself. I look away, to Pat who is crying, lost in the air and the water. And I glimpse Tina, who is sitting just beside and to the back of us. Her eyes are soft and full of tears too, and her mouth is open and the air is gliding in (Kelly 57).

This 'multivalent evocation' of continuity between self and world (Lynch 179) eschews the temptation to, in Rigby's words, '[construct] a view' (*Topographies* 77). There is immersion here, physical and psychic attunement to the natural element of air. What matters in this passage, and what matters for Rigby, '… is not verisimilitude but ambience: the intimation of what happens when the boundaries of subject and object become blurred and the self is radically opened to a circumambient natural world' (*Topographies* 226). If as Tom Lynch suggests, nature writing along with other forms of environmental literature can, through its use of ecological aesthetics achieve a sense of the 'permeability of the self… the mutual interpenetration of the body and the surrounding ecosystem', it may well function as an access point, not only to the deeper dimensions of the 'ecological self' as advanced by deep ecology, but to the self-disclosure of world as it manifests in time and space (Lynch 180).

In the Australian context then, nature writing has the potential to deepen settler identification with, and belonging in, the land. By making manifest the porous boundary or membrane that exists between 'organisms and their environment' and indeed between people and their place, nature writing affirms connections that are both substantive and somatic. It contributes to what Lynch calls a 'sensuous semiotics in which the full range of human senses engage in the experience of place' (184). On a continent where the inner life of the land has for millennia been 'sung up' through story, dance, song and ceremony, nature writing, particularly in its ecological aesthetic, reminds us that embodied engagement with place is not only possible, but central to processes of place identification and forms of 'reverential labour'– central in other words, to the experience of belonging (Rose *Reports* 208).

Conclusion

The tasks and potentials of nature writing in the Australian context are varied and complex. In giving witness to this land, in listening for the depth of its music and the delicacy of its song, nature writing is challenged to hold multiple perspectives in view, to write place from a stance that is both experiential and poetic, that is lyrical and ecological, that is spatial, temporal and deeply relational. In countering the highly visualist bias of Western approaches to place, nature writing affirms the reality that as humans we 'never exist in the singular' as Levinas puts it, that as members of the community of life we are embedded in the world, are part of its dynamic movement and implicated in its ends (Levinas 58). But in doing this, there are particular things in the Australian context that nature writing must negotiate, must incorporate and consider. Revisiting, referencing and reclaiming those early land-focused texts that prefigure such a stance is one obvious starting point for contemporary writers of place. Noticing via the historical and literary record the resonance some of our settler forebears experienced with this continent affirms and strengthens current efforts towards identification and exchange.

Disrupting discourses that subtly perpetuate the concept of *terra nullius* is critical to all forms of 'place honesty' in this country (Plumwood *Shadow Places* 2). By writing Aboriginal place-making into the text, and by acknowledging the agential and psychic dimensions of matter itself, nature writing has the potential to challenge oppositional binaries and reposition the human within a network of interdependent relationships. These relationships are, as Mathews argues, potentially communicative. In Australia, where the land has for millennia been invoked through poetic address, been known and communed with through visceral and embodied interaction, nature writing is potentially one access point for settlers seeking a similar communicative exchange. As Mathews comments and, given the current ecological crisis one can only hope that it is true, once settlers have experienced for themselves this communicativeness of world, of being 'graced, even loved, by world', they may begin to feel towards this land 'the way Aboriginal people feel towards their Dreamings' (*Desiring* 14). Nature writing, in its capacity for disruption and invocation, is positioned to help make it so.

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